

OPTIMIZING CONVERSATIONAL COMPETENCE: UTILIZING COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORKS TO ENHANCE SPONTANEOUS SPEECH PRODUCTION AMONG INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract: Cultivating sustained verbal proficiency remains a complex hurdle within English language pedagogy, particularly for intermediate-level students transitioning from passive comprehension to active communication. Traditional approaches to oral instruction frequently depend on isolated presentations or scripted scripts that fail to mirror authentic human interaction. This paper analyzes the pedagogical value of structured peer collaboration and interactive group dynamics within higher education conversational courses. By establishing low-stress, interactive learning environments, these methodologies aim to reduce communicative apprehension and accelerate vocabulary retrieval. This study examines the structural design of interactive assignments, the evolving role of the instructor, and the measurable impact of collaborative tasks on student confidence. The outcomes indicate that when speaking exercises are carefully scaffolded through peer interaction, individual production time increases, collaborative correction thrives, and oral confidence is significantly elevated.

Keywords: Conversational Fluency, Collaborative Learning, Communicative Pedagogy, Oral Apprehension, Interactive Exercises, Student Autonomy.

1. Introduction

Within modern tertiary education, oral English proficiency has evolved from an optional academic luxury into a vital requirement for international career readiness. Consequently, university language departments increasingly view the capacity for effective spoken expression as the definitive gauge of an individual's practical language mastery. A persistent challenge, however, lies in the vast difference between structural knowledge and spontaneous verbal execution. While reading comprehension, text analysis, and grammatical rules can be effectively mastered through solo study, conversational fluency is an inherently communal skill. It requires an adaptable, highly interactive setting where rapid cognitive processing, immediate word retrieval, and the fluid exchange of meaning take place in real time. Without this

conversational flexibility, language acquisition remains theoretical, locked away in textbooks rather than put to use in real-world human interactions.

For intermediate university students, the speaking classroom is frequently a major source of emotional stress and academic vulnerability. This specific learning stage represents a complex turning point in a student's linguistic journey. At this level, learners generally hold a large enough passive vocabulary to design complex ideas and understand the grammatical rules of the language. However, they lack the cognitive automaticity needed to maintain unscripted conversations. When required to speak spontaneously, a mental block occurs; the distance between thinking an idea in one's native language and translating it into spoken English can feel impossible to bridge under pressure.

This psychological strain is worsened by outdated, instructor-led teaching models. When teachers rely on traditional, one-by-one speaking assessments—such as a format where an instructor interviews a single student while the rest of the class sits as passive observers—learning stops. This outdated design severely limits opportunities for individual expression, reducing active student speaking time to just a few minutes per class. Additionally, it maximizes performance anxiety by placing the student under an intense evaluative lens, transforming what should be a natural conversation into a stressful, artificial presentation. In these environments, the classroom stops functioning as a safe space for language practice and instead turns into a source of student fear and silent isolation.

To fix these structural flaws, modern language teaching must embrace a major shift that places organized peer teamwork at the center of the lesson. By decentralizing the classroom space and dividing conversational tasks among small student teams, educators can dramatically increase individual speech output at the same exact time. This approach changes the core power structure of the classroom, moving away from an intimidating, teacher-centered lecture to an active network of shared dialogue. In these smaller peer circles, the pressure is shared, the fear of making mistakes in public is lowered, and immediate grading pressure is replaced by cooperative communication goals.

Accordingly, this study investigates the intentional and organized application of structured group assignments within university-level conversational English classes. By breaking down the design of communicative tasks, this paper explains how changing the structure of speaking exercises can reduce situational nervousness and lower emotional barriers. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how cooperative frameworks encourage peer-assisted learning, maximize classroom efficiency, and establish the genuine communicative confidence needed to succeed in today's interconnected global job market.

2. Literature Review

The pedagogical transition from teacher-dominated instruction to peer-based interactive speaking settings is firmly rooted in Long's Interaction Hypothesis. Long (1996) maintained that secondary language development is greatly optimized when students encounter communication barriers and are compelled to participate in the "negotiation of meaning." In conventional, lecture-focused settings, information delivery is typically unidirectional, offering students very few chances to challenge or explore their existing language skills. Conversely, when individuals are organized into collaborative peer teams, the flow of discussion becomes spontaneous and fluid.

When a team member fails to understand a specific statement, the conversational momentum pauses. Rather than serving as an instructional failure, this conversational friction acts as a crucial cognitive driver. To bypass the misunderstanding and reach a mutual goal, the speaker is forced to pivot. Instead of abandoning the thought, they must actively participate in what language acquisition specialists call "comprehensible output modification." They are compelled to restructure their sentences, clarify their primary objective, experiment with alternative vocabulary words, or simplify their grammar structures.

[Student A Initiates Idea] ➡ [Conversational Friction (Peer Misunderstanding)]
➡ [Meaning Clarification] ➡ [Revised Output & Language Growth]

This active revision process drives linguistic progress through a variety of unique cognitive developments:

- **The Recognition Function:** As detailed by Swain (1995) in her research on language production, when students experience a communicative disconnect, they instantly recognize the discrepancy between their intended message and their physical ability to articulate it. This self-awareness highlights specific structural limitations that require immediate resolution.

- **Syntactic Manipulation vs. Passive Comprehension:** When learners simply listen to an instructor's lecture, they use semantic processing—gathering the overall message without dissecting the underlying rules. However, when required to rephrase a concept for a classmate's benefit, they must transition to syntactic manipulation, actively organizing word sequences, verb tenses, and multi-word verbs.

- **Linguistic Experimentation:** Small-group exercises serve as an approachable proving ground. Students utilize their peers to test out various assumptions regarding how the English language functions. If a classmate successfully decodes a newly introduced idiom, the linguistic assumption is validated; if the partner appears perplexed, the speaker immediately adapts or discards that specific phrasing hypothesis.

In the end, this continuous behavioral loop fosters deep cognitive adaptation. By

requiring intermediate-level students to navigate conversational obstacles collectively, organized peer interaction converts receptive knowledge into expressive speech, solidifying the mental connections necessary for true communicative agility.

The Impact of Foreign Language Speaking Apprehension

Verbal communication in a secondary language is an inherently vulnerable activity. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct set of self-perceptions, beliefs, and emotional responses tied explicitly to classroom language learning. Their research demonstrated that elevated stress levels directly impair working memory and hinder rapid word retrieval. In conventional individual speaking tasks, the threat of immediate instructor evaluation blocks fluid verbal production. On the other hand, Dörnyei (2001) demonstrated that small-group settings distribute conversational pressure, creating a psychological cushion where students feel secure experimenting with new phrases and advanced sentence structures without fearing public mistakes.

Maximizing Student Output vs. Instructor Domination

In many conventional language classrooms, instructor speech dominates up to 70% of the class period. In a course dedicated specifically to conversational practice, however, this distribution hinders development. Harmer (2007) maintains that to achieve authentic fluency, learners need maximum opportunities to physically produce the target language. Organized peer work effectively multiplies student speaking time. Instead of a single learner speaking at a time in a fifty-minute class, dividing a class of thirty into small teams allows multiple students to produce speech concurrently, exponentially expanding the time spent practicing authentic communication.

Scaffolding Conversational Tasks for Intermediate Learners

While group interaction is immensely valuable, unorganized dialogue can easily devolve into off-topic chatter or a return to the students' native tongue. Consequently, conversational tasks must be meticulously scaffolded. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) establishes that with appropriate structural support—such as functional vocabulary guides, contextual cues, and explicit peer roles—learners can successfully navigate communicative tasks that lie just beyond their independent capabilities. Current research demonstrates that productive group work relies on precise task architecture, clear target outcomes, and internal accountability systems.

3. Methodology: Architectural Design of Collaborative Speaking Tasks

To maximize conversational output, a structured peer-interaction framework was integrated into the core spoken English curriculum. The instructional approach abandoned open-ended prompts like *"Talk about your favorite hobbies"* and replaced them with goal-directed, collaborative assignments engineered to trigger active language use.

3.1. Interactive Simulations with Conflicting Perspectives

Students were organized into teams of three or four and provided with specific role cards featuring opposing goals (e.g., local environmental activists, corporate developers, and municipal officials debating a urban expansion project). This framework required students to utilize functional language for negotiation, persuasion, agreement, and professional interruption. Lexical support matrices containing useful structures (e.g., *"From my perspective..."*, *"I see your point, but..."*) were provided to guide the interactions.

3.2. Strategic Information-Gap Activities

In this model, an authentic need to communicate was intentionally engineered. Working in pairs, Student A possessed vital data (such as a map, graph, or schedule) that Student B did not have. The partners were required to interact exclusively in English to solve a problem or complete a shared document. Because the objective could not be achieved without a verbal exchange, passive silence was effectively eliminated from the classroom.

3.3. Peer Accountability and Structural Roles

To prevent the common problem of high-proficiency students dominating the dialogue while less confident students remained silent, each team member was assigned a specific structural role:

- **The Facilitator:** Ensured the group remained on track and respected the established time limits.
- **The Language Monitor:** Gently encouraged peers to remain in the target language and implement the targeted vocabulary.
- **The Presenter:** Charged with summarizing the group's final decisions and insights to the rest of the class during the final review session.

4. Results and Discussion

The evolution from presentation-style grading to organized peer communication produced visible changes in the classroom environment, fluency performance, and overall student engagement.

Table 1: Structural Analysis of Conversational Pedagogies

Classroom Metric	Individual Presentation Model	Structured Peer Collaboration	Communicative Impact
Student Expression Time	Highly restricted (Approx. 1–2 minutes per individual per hour).	Highly expanded (Approx. 20–30 minutes of active speech per student).	Faster processing speeds and accelerated lexical retrieval.
Psychological Stress Filter	Elevated; fear of public mistakes and immediate correction.	Minimized; conversational errors are navigated within a supportive circle.	Increased willingness to engage in spontaneous communication.
Language Application	Reproduction of practiced scripts; predictable and static.	Spontaneous negotiation of meaning; fluid and adaptive.	Growth of authentic conversational coping mechanisms.

Dismantling the Psychological Barrier

By removing the immediate, critical gaze of the instructor from every spoken sentence, the emotional filter within the classroom was significantly lowered. Intermediate students showed a clear increase in their willingness to initiate speech. When linguistic errors occurred within a small group, peers frequently co-constructed the correct form together, or the speaker self-corrected without interrupting the conversational flow.

Reconfiguring Classroom Dynamics

The gathered data highlights a profound shift in teacher and student dynamics. The educator no longer served as the primary conversational partner or an active auditor. Instead, the teacher moved around the room as an unobtrusive guide, quietly noting widespread structural or pronunciation difficulties to be addressed during a full-class review at the end of the lesson. This structure provided students with authentic communicative independence, training them to utilize their own cognitive resources and strategies rather than continually stopping for teacher validation.

5. Conclusion

Spoken language proficiency cannot flourish under the restrictions of outdated, teacher-dominated instructional models. For intermediate-level university students to successfully transition into advanced fluency, the educational environment must

operate as an active network of peer-to-peer communication. Structured group assignments achieve this by expanding student expression time, lowering foreign language speaking anxiety, and replicating the spontaneous negotiation of meaning required in real-world professional environments.

Adopting this model requires planning, detailed task architecture, and a readiness among academic departments to abandon rigid, lecture-focused systems. It is recommended that higher education institutions update their methodology manuals to prioritize interactive group frameworks, alter assessment criteria to value fluency alongside grammatical accuracy, and provide instructors with modern training in communicative task design. When the focus shifts from demanding flawless execution to encouraging genuine peer connection, the true communicative capacity of language learners is unlocked.

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